

Just a Man

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: After being almost too late to save Lois, Clark goes to talk to her while she recovers in the hospital. But Lois has a trick or two up her sleeve, which may just save Clark from making the biggest mistake of his life. Sequel to “Nobody’s Hero.”

Disclaimer: I neither own, nor make, anything. All Lois and Clark characters, plot points, and lines of dialogue belong to DC Comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd Productions, and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise. As always, I’m just playing with my toys.

Author’s Note: This story was brewing in my head for some time, just waiting for me to get a handle on it. This is the much lighter part of the tale.

This story takes place right after Superman wins his court case in “Whine, Whine, Whine.” For this one, Lois’ chat with Dan lasted until later into the night, as you will see.

This is part two of two stories. Please find the beginning of this story in “Nobody’s Hero,” which takes place immediately before we rejoin Lois and Clark in *this* story. I don’t normally split stories like this, but I just felt this one needed it, with the switch in tone.

The time drags by as I wait for visiting hours at the hospital to begin. I’m doing my best to keep myself occupied. I strip the sheets from my bed and change them for fresh ones. I shower at normal, human speed, letting the cool water carry away my sweat. That’s three showers in less than twelve hours. At this rate, I’m going to be the cleanest man in Metropolis. I only wish my mind was as squeaky clean and unencumbered as my body.

My thoughts keep circling back to Lois. What did she mean, calling to — or was it *for*? — Clark? Does she know about me? Was she merely looking for the comfort of her friend and partner? Why not call for Scardino? After all, she *did* choose him, when confronted with the choice between what she perceived as three different men — Clark, Scardino, and Superman.

A walk might do me some good. It will keep me occupied and kill the time I have left before I can see Lois. I think I’ll head in the direction of the hospital. By the time I get there, it should be time for visiting hours. I’m not really hungry, but I’ll stop for a cup of coffee and a Danish on my way. I’ll get Lois her usual order too. I’m sure she’ll be hungry, and I think she might appreciate the simple, familiar routine of me providing her with her breakfast. The routine that’s about to be broken when I leave Metropolis.

My departure will have to be delayed. I know that, without question. I will not - *cannot* — leave until Lois has fully recovered. Oddly, I don’t mind the delay. In fact, I’m completely okay with it. The heartache of seeing Lois with Scardino will pale in comparison to the lifelong heartache I’ll suffer once I leave her behind forever. I’m in no rush to experience that, though I don’t relish the slow torture it will be, to be so close to Lois without being able to outwardly love her the way I’ve always wanted to.

I’m surprised, leaving my apartment, at how nice out it is today. A cloudless blue sky above. A cool breeze, though not enough to warrant wearing a jacket. The streets — mostly quiet at

this early hour on a Saturday. It feels good, to walk down the sidewalks that I know like the back of my own hand. In a way, I already miss this city.

There’s a florist on the corner, and I’m drawn into the shop, open even at this sleepy hour of the morning. It smells amazing in here, each flower’s unique scent dueling with the others in a beautiful, sensory dance, which delights my nose in a way that it cannot for the average person. The store, located on the corner of Carlyle and Chauncey, is a tiny little family run business, which is what drew me here, as opposed to the huge store directly across the street.

I find myself torn between a spray of red roses and a vase full of colorful carnations. The carnations will be hardy and last for a while. The roses symbolize my love; undying, eternal, even now, even despite my resolve to leave Metropolis. For what feels like a long time, I look from one to the other, trying to come to a decision. It’s amazing. I’m capable of making split second decisions in the heat of a rescue as Superman, or in chasing a story as a reporter, but something as banal as choosing which bunch of flowers to buy can give me such an internal crisis. But only because it’s for Lois. If it was for anyone else, I’d know exactly which bunch to buy. The problem is, I would buy out the entire shop for Lois, if I could. I would flood her hospital room with enough blooms to leave only enough space left for her and me, shutting out the rest of the world behind a curtain of colorful petals and sweet perfume.

Again, I look at the two vases of flowers. Which one is appropriate? Which one walks the correct line? The carnations — distant but friendly to my eyes - as I try to extricate myself from her life? Or the roses, a much more personal symbol of the love I will always carry for her, regardless of whether or not she ever returns it? Frustrated, I decide it isn’t worth the mental debate I’m enduring. I’ll buy both. Lois can decide for herself what my intentions are and which flowers were the right ones to buy. I certainly can’t begrudge her the ability to do so.

At the register, I see a small, cream colored bear. His smile isn’t stitched quite right, giving him a lopsided grin, and I can’t help but feel a certain kinship with the stuffed creature. Without a second thought, I add him to my purchase. I consider getting a Get Well balloon as well, but I think Lois might get right out of bed and remove my spleen for that one. She just doesn’t strike me as the type to enjoy the large, band aid shaped Mylar balloon, announcing to all the world that she’s injured. I pass, shaking my head softly to myself, and pay for the items I’ve picked out. I fill out two small cards to place with the flowers, just in case Lois isn’t awake today, and to remind her always of how much I care. It’s not exactly fair to her, I know. She’s made her choice and doesn’t need me to look like I’m attempting to wreck her budding relationship with Scardino. Because, as much as I wish I could, that’s not what I’m trying to accomplish here.

The clerk, a bright-eyed woman in her late sixties, boxes up my items to make it easier to carry. I thank her, then continue on my way, stopping only once more to pick up breakfast for Lois and myself. It’s getting harder to juggle everything I’m carrying, though the weight isn’t a factor. I’ve just run out of arms and hands to hold it all. Thankfully, the hospital isn’t much further. I finally step through the automatic doors, feeling quite proud of myself for not spilling a single drop of the precious caffeinated drinks, or losing so much as a single petal from the flowers I carry.

I’m alone when I get to the elevator bank, so I use some fancy maneuvering to push the button with my elbow, calling the car down to where I’m waiting. I do the same inside the car when it arrives, and ride in silence up to Lois’ floor, carefully and purposefully squashing down the desire to reach out with my super senses to find her. I know where she is, and I really want to avoid the overload of noises and smells that are waiting to assault

me, should I slip into one of my powers.

Lois is almost sitting, the back of her bed at an incline, when I step into the doorframe. Typical Lois. She *should* probably be resting, laying flat, but my overachiever partner and friend isn't satisfied to go along with what she needs to be doing. She constantly pushes the boundaries. It's one of the innumerable facets to her that I love so dearly. She sees me a second after I arrive and her face lights up. Funny, I never thought I'd ever see such a look of pure bliss on her face again, not after how lousy I've been lately, what with all of my disappearances and jealousy towards Scardino. Whatever pain medication they are giving Lois must be pretty strong stuff indeed. In fact, I'll bet she's absolutely flying right about now.

"Clark!" she says, genuinely thrilled to see me, by the tone of her voice. "Come in! Come in! Shut the door behind you, would you?"

I do as I'm told before speaking. "Lois. Thank God you're awake. I was so afraid..." I can't force myself to finish that statement. Instead, I place down my burdens on the small table by her bedside and gently hug her, reveling in the fact that she's alive and strong enough to hug me in return. "Anyway, I come bearing gifts. Flowers to brighten your room," I say, as I produce the two bunches of blossoms I picked out for her.

"Clark, they're gorgeous," Lois says, eyeing them as I set them on the night stand to her right. "Thank you. But two bunches?"

"I couldn't decide. And you're welcome," I reply, unable to prevent myself from beaming with pride that I've helped make Lois so happy, knowing this might well be the last time I ever do so. "But that's not all I brought. A friend to keep you company during the hours when I can't be here," I say, handing her the bear with the crooked smile, which she smiles at and hugs to herself. "And real food, from the outside. I don't know if they've fed you or not, but, by all accounts, hospital food is supposed to be awful."

She grins at me. "I'm not sure the nurses would approve."

Her tone is light, airy, teasing. Where has all the tension gone? She hasn't been this playful with me in a while, since my disappearing act started to really make her angry.

I grin back. "I won't tell if you won't."

Lois laughs, and the last of my worries uncoil from the cold knot in the pit of my stomach. "Careful, Kent. We wouldn't want you to tarnish that Boy Scout image."

"Good thing I was never a scout," I say, shrugging, teasing her right back, opening up the white wax paper bag from the coffee shop. "Eat up. You must be starving."

"I am," she confirms, biting into the breakfast burrito I got for her. Her eyes slide shut and she softly moans in pleasure at the first steaming mouthful. "This is heavenly."

We eat in companionable silence. Lois because she's obviously starving. Me because I'm not sure what to say. I have a thousand things I want to say and ask, but I'm not sure where or how to start. Lois wolfs her breakfast down in a rush, then sighs contentedly.

"So..." she begins, looking as uncertain as I feel. "What did the doctors tell you?"

"Well," I say, dragging the word out a little longer than is necessary. "Not much. You were shot, as I'm sure you know."

"Yeah, I remember that part," she says, lightly rubbing the blankets over the place in her abdomen where she was wounded. "I've got the stitches to prove it too."

I nod and reach over to her, unable to stop myself. With one finger, I trace the line of her jaw, carefully avoiding the cuts and bruises that mar her flesh. "You were in bad shape when Superman found you and brought you here. And," I say, unable to resist teasing her as she sips her coffee, "the doctors had some trouble when they were giving you blood."

"What? Why?" she asks, a little bit of defensiveness in her voice. "I'm AB, the universal recipient."

"Well," I say, again dragging out that one little word, "it seems you have more *coffee* running through your veins than actual blood."

Lois laughs. "In that case, I'm blaming you for being my enabler," she says, raising her cup an extra inch in a mock toast or salute.

"Hmmm," I say, pretending to think it over. "I guess I can shoulder some of the responsibility."

"You'd better."

I smile, but feel it melting off my face almost as soon as it starts. "Lois... what were you doing out on the streets last night at two-thirty in the morning?" I ask softly.

A pensive look crosses her face. "Promise you won't lecture me?"

I hold up my hand as if I'm swearing into a courtroom. "Promise."

"I was on my way home from your apartment."

"My apartment? Why? And why not in your Jeep?"

"I think something's wrong with the transmission. I brought it into the shop when the court broke for recess during Superman's hearing."

"Oh." Smooth, Clark. Is that the best I can come up with?

"Anyway, you weren't home, so I was headed back to my place when I was jumped. Three guys, trying to mug me. All I had on me was a twenty, in case I felt like grabbing a cab back to my place." She sighs heavily. "I *should* have done that, but I wanted to walk, to clear my head a little. Anyway, that got them mad, finding so little cash. They must have thought I was holding out on them. I tried to fight them off, but they got the better of me. One had a gun, the other two had knives."

"What did they look like?"

Shame fills me that I haven't even *thought* of scouring the streets looking for the ones responsible for Lois' condition until now. Not that I would have known what to keep my eyes peeled for. But I should have done... something, anything. I just don't know what or how.

Lois shakes her head. "Don't bother. I was watching the news before you came. Seems the same three tried to knock over a twenty-four hour convenience store sometime after they shot me. The clerk was packing a gun of his own. Wounded two of them and held the third at bay until the police arrived."

"I'm glad to hear it," I say, relieved that the people who dared to lay a hand on Lois are locked away now, unable to hurt her or anyone else again. "But... that doesn't explain what you were doing, what you were thinking, coming to my place in the middle of the night."

Lois sighs deeply. "I did something, last night. Something I hope I won't regret. Last night, Dan came over and..."

"Lois, please," I say gently, cutting her off. "If you're going to tell me that you and Dan..."

"Clark," she says, cutting me off in turn. "I said I did something. Not someone. Now, would you let me finish?"

"Sure," I say, my heart sinking a bit as I try to brace myself for the inevitable. "Sorry."

"Thank you," she says. "Now then, like I was saying. Dan showed up at my apartment and I invited him in. We talked for a while. I told him I'd been doing a lot of thinking and that, well... that I didn't want to see him anymore."

"What?" I sputter, unable to hold it in.

"He's a nice guy and all, if not a little... over-enthusiastic. But, I realized something, when I was talking to Elise, Calvin Dregg's wife. I was trying to make her understand that Calvin didn't love her, and how evident it was in the way her treated her. I told her that it's easy to see when a man loves you, in all the little ways he acts, the things he does." She sighs again and

shakes her head. “It was like a light bulb switched on in my head. And when it came on, it cast light on things I knew deep down, tucked away in the shadows — things I hadn’t wanted to acknowledge, because I wasn’t ready to. I had been so focused on your disappearing act and what I thought it meant — that you weren’t ready to commit to a relationship or that, like my father, you didn’t care about how much hurt you caused.”

“Lois, that’s not…”

“Ssh,” she instructs me, and I instantly close my mouth and swallow the protest that’s burning on my tongue. “But, in trying to make Elise see the light about Calvin, I came to realize that, whatever the reason for your disappearances — whatever *true* reason — it wasn’t because you don’t care. In fact, in thinking it over, I realized that everything I’ve seen in you, probably since I met you, has always pointed to love.”

“That’s because it *has* been, Lois.”

“I know. I also know now that part of the reason I’ve been so angry with you lately is because I’ve felt rejected. And that hurt, because I love you Clark. Completely, truly in love, in a way I’ve ever felt for anyone else. Or ever *could* feel for another.”

“You…you do?” My words sound distant over the rush of blood in my ears as my heart rate accelerates. I half wonder if I’ve actually said them out loud, or only within my mind.

Lois rolls her eyes. “That’s why I went to your place last night. To tell you how I feel, and about my decision…that I choose you. That I want to be with *you*. Not Superman. Not Dan.”

“Oh, Lois. You have no idea how much I’ve always wanted to hear you say that. So…where is he anyway? Wildman Scardino couldn’t be bothered to come visit you while you’re here? Did he take the news that badly? Or did you not let him know?” For once, I actually wouldn’t mind seeing the annoying DEA agent, if only to prove that he’s not completely heartless, that he actually *does* care about Lois.

Lois gestures vaguely. “He was pretty angry when I told him that I don’t want to see him anymore. We wound up arguing until late, him trying his best to woo me back. Then, when he realized I was serious and not changing my mind, he immediately got on the phone with his office and volunteered for a year-long investigation in Alaska. He was supposedly heading from my apartment directly to the airport.”

“Yikes,” I say, truly pained for her. Dan abandoned her, and I was about to. “Sorry.”

“I’m not,” she says with a light sigh. “But…all those boxes in your apartment, Clark. Why?”

“You went into my place?”

Lois nods and shrugs. “I thought maybe you just didn’t want to see me and weren’t opening your door. I was determined to talk to you, so I used the spare key under your mat.”

“Oh boy.”

Again Lois nods. “You can say that again.”

“How much trouble am I in?” I wonder aloud.

“That depends. Did you have plans to move?”

“I…I was thinking about it. I mean, we’ve been so unhappy together lately. And I haven’t exactly been treating you fairly. I thought maybe…maybe I needed to…” I falter in my words, realizing only now how stupid I sound and how flimsy my reasoning is.

“To what? Slip away, vanish without a trace?” There’s anger in her voice, though it’s weak. I guess the drugs are holding the full force of Lois’ wrath at bay.

“I just…didn’t think you’d want me around anymore. I didn’t want to have the opportunity to hurt you any further. And…I didn’t want to be here, to see you dating Scardino,” I sheepishly admit. “I’m sorry, Lois. I know that makes me selfish and the worst kind of coward.”

“And now? Are you going to run from me, Clark?” A tremor

runs through her words. “Because I really need to know, so I can prepare for the heartbreak.”

I shake my head, swallowing hard to try to shrink the lump in my throat. It seems like I’ve perpetually had one ever since I first came across Lois’ bleeding and abandoned body last night.

“No,” I whisper, my voice rough. “I never *wanted* to leave, Lois. It was the hardest decision I’ve ever made in my life. I thought…I thought I’d lost you to Dan. I had no reason to stay here because of that. My job, my friends…it would have hurt, losing them, but my only *true* bond to this city is you. But now…now you’ve given me every reason, every desire to stay. I’m ready to commit to you and to our relationship. I’m ready to take the next step with you, if you are.”

Lois smiles at me, and I don’t believe I’ve ever seen so beautiful a sight before in all my life. My heart soars and it’s a struggle to keep my body from following suit.

“I am,” she reassures me. “I’m ready for the next step. I want to be with you, Clark.”

“Lois…that next step…it requires me to come clean about something. Something I haven’t been honest about. Something that…I’m not really sure how you’re going to react to. Something that I’ve never told anyone else before…and because of that, it scares me to say it out loud.”

“I think I have an idea of what you’re going to say.”

“Lois, it’s not a simple matter…” I start to say, trying to will her to understand just how difficult this is for me.

Lois lifts her hand, encumbered as it is with wires and IV lines and monitoring devices. I’m sitting close enough for her to reach over and touch me. She does so, laying a hand against my chest, which causes electric sparks and warmth to shoot through my body, as her touch always does. Then, lightly, she silently traces an S over the whole of my chest, in perfect alignment of where the crest of the House of El normally sits.

“I know, Clark,” she says again. “About you. About *him*. I understand it all now. It all makes sense.”

“Lois,” I say, breathlessly, waiting for the moment she’ll yell or cry or tell me to get lost. “How?...When?...I’m…I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“For not telling you sooner. And for not being there for you last night when you needed me.”

“But you were. You saved me. Without you, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“I should have been there sooner,” I press, shaking my head.

Lois grins wryly at me. “So you’re not going to try and deny the fact that you moonlight in tights and a cape?”

That makes me laugh. God, it feels so good to laugh! “No.”

“Good.” She seems oddly calm and composed.

“But, how did you…? *When* did you…?”

Again she smiles, that beautiful, life-giving smile. “Last night. Kind of.”

I’m fairly certain my eyes are popping right out of my skull. “Last night? Kind of?” Great, I sound like a parrot.

She nods. “I didn’t make the connection until Superman found me. When I opened my eyes, the look of hurt and concern in his eyes — *your* eyes — all I saw was Clark, without the glasses. The unashamed and completely transparent look of love on your face…it all made sense to me in one, blinding moment, right before I passed out. I tried to tell you.”

“You said ‘Clark’ to me last night,” I say in wonder. “You knew.”

“I’d just made the connection, but I hadn’t convinced myself yet that I was completely correct in my thought process. I tried to ask you. I tried to let you know that I wanted you, *Clark*, to be my savior, the one who’d stand by me, the one who always rescued me, not just from bad situations on a fairly regular basis, but in so many private, personal ways.”

For a moment, I'm speechless. Lois *did* figure out my secret. She was calling Superman by his true name — Clark. But, even more astonishing, she was also calling *for* Clark in the same moment. She wasn't looking for Superman. She didn't want the Spandex-clad alien. She wanted Clark — the man, the humble reporter, her friend, and, apparently, the man she's chosen to love.

"But, like I said," she continues, before I can form a coherent thought to verbalize, "I still wasn't a hundred percent sure last night."

"You seemed fairly confident about it, when you first mentioned it, a minute ago," I say, giving her a crooked grin, teasing her. God, it's so good to be able to be so normal around and with her!

She smiles back. "When I woke up this morning, before you got here, I started doing some thinking. I started to compare you and Superman. And what I noticed was a pattern. How I've never seen you two together, outside of that press conference when Diana Stride tried to expose you. How Superman never looked quite right to me that night, though I could never pinpoint why. How'd you do that, by the way? Projection?"

"Lasers," I say, marveling at how easily I'm discussing this, when I've always feared this conversation with Lois.

"Ah," she says, as if that simple word makes everything crystal clear to her.

"My mom," I say, by way of explanation, shrugging.

Lois' smile widens. "I love your parents. Anyway, every time Superman showed up, Clark was missing. And then there were all the little things, things you said and did. Clark might say something to me, only to have Superman repeat some variation of that, or vice versa. And the way Superman always talked to me, like I was the center of the universe. Only one other person has ever treated me like that. *You*. My best friend. I can't believe I never saw it before. Then there was one, final thing."

"What?" I ask, mesmerized and completely incapable of squeezing any other words out of myself.

She leans a little further back into her pillows, deep in thought and staring at the ceiling tiles, looking a bit tired. "I used to think that Clark had bits of Superman in him, like your unfailing manners and willingness...no, your *eagerness* to go out on a limb for those who can't do for themselves. But today, I realized it's the other way around. Superman has so much of Clark in him. His politeness. His decency. His generosity. His optimism and quiet strength. His unwillingness to allow me to continue on as I once was, and his determination to make me a better person. It was everything I'd come to know and love about Clark."

I can't help but laugh. "Congratulations."

Lois looks confused and snaps her attention back to me. Her brow scrunches up in an adorable way, like it always does, whenever she's working on solving a puzzle.

"On what?" she finally asks.

"You're starting to talk about me in the third person."

"Oops. I didn't mean..."

"No, no," I say, gently cutting her off with a laugh. "I do the same thing. It drives my folks nuts."

She joins in on my laughter for a moment, then turns serious. "Clark?"

"Yes?"

A little shudder runs up my spine and I try to brace myself. This is it. She's finally going to start yelling at me. I've sometimes pictured this moment, when I either told Lois my secret, or she figured it out on her own. She's always, in every single scenario, been hurt and angry. She's always yelled and shed tears. So far, now that it's actually come to pass, she's been far too calm and collected. The bomb has to explode at some point. I just know it.

"I understand why you didn't tell me. If word got out, you

and your folks would be a target. So would your friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. And it must be scary, knowing that if anyone ever found out, they'd look at you differently, even if they didn't splash the news all over town or use it against you."

What? Did I just hear that correctly?

"You mean...you're not upset with me?"

She shakes her head. "I was, at first, until I started thinking of all the implications. You know I'll protect you, right? I'll do anything I can to help."

"I know," I say, nodding. "My parents...they were always afraid that if anyone discovered I was different, that some scientist or government agency would try to capture me and put me in a lab to dissect me like a frog," I say, my voice a hushed, choked whisper.

"Oh, Clark," she says, reaching over and taking my hand.

"I'm so sorry you had to carry this, all alone."

"I wasn't really alone," I say. "I always had my parents. And I had you too. Even if I couldn't tell you everything, you have no idea how just being around you made me feel...connected to the world...in a way I'd never felt before. And I'm so glad now, that you know. Lately, I've been contemplating telling you — searching for the right words and trying to find my courage. I've been so afraid, Lois, of losing you, because of this secret, that I nearly did. Because I haven't treated you the way I should, in favor of protecting the truth about who and what I really am — a strange visitor from another planet."

"You thought about telling me?" she asks, sounding surprised.

I nod. "When you came looking for me at my apartment last night...I was out, just sort of flying aimlessly. I had so much on my mind that I just needed to get out of my place, because everything in it reminds me of you. I thought...after what you said to Superman once his case was dismissed...I was sure you'd chosen Dan. I spent half the night feeling sorry for myself," I admit, feeling my cheeks grow warm with a blush, "part of the night trying to convince myself that leaving Metropolis was the only way to be fair to you, and part of the night wondering if I should come clean...about everything. I just...I never wanted to use my secret as a method of persuading you to choose me. In fact, since the moment I first came up with the idea of Superman, I never wanted him...or his powers...to be the reason why you'd choose to be with me. Because he's not who I am. He's just... what I can do...a mask I wear so I can live my life and still help people. I needed you to choose me for Clark, who I am. Who I *really* am."

"And I have."

"I know."

"And you won't run from that, from me?" she asks again, and I know she needs that reassurance, just as I've needed hers that she loves me for *me*, not for my powers.

"Never," I solemnly swear. "I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life at your side. I'm so in love with you. Ever since the second I laid eyes on you, I have loved you. I always will, until the end of time. Nothing could ever change that. Nothing ever will."

Lois swallows hard, and I can almost swear there's a glimmer of a tear in her eye. "I love you too, Clark. You're the only person who has ever taken the time to get to know me, to not be daunted by the protective walls I built around myself, and to subtly tear them all down, stone by stone, crack by crack, chip by chip. You've put up with me in every single one of my moods, especially when we first met and I was so horrible toward you. You've never been anything but kind to me, even when my actions forced you to take me down a peg, like when you sent me to the Sewer Reclamation Facility. I couldn't believe that you'd actually owned up to that one, and the naked apology on your face, which told me that you really *did* feel bad about it, when

you had every right to be enjoying the moment. I never told you, but I respected you so much for that. Clark, you're the best friend I've ever had, and the soul mate I never thought I'd find."

"And," I say, my voice slightly hoarse from the emotions surging through my body, "you are mine. I've never had a best friend like you. I've never opened up to anyone as I have with you, my secret aside. Though I'd always dreamt about finding the other half of my heart and soul, I used to think it was a fool's wish. Until the day I met you. In that moment, everything changed and I knew I'd found you."

A nurse knocks on the door, causing us both to fall silent, as though we've been caught doing something wrong. The idea is ridiculous, of course, but the silence is better than pouring out our hearts while we have an audience. The nurse looks preoccupied as she opens the door and bustles into the room, a bag of clear fluid in her hand. She checks Lois' chart quickly, then swaps out the almost empty bag of medication on Lois' IV pole for the one she's carrying.

"How are you feeling this morning, Miss Lane?" she asks.

Lois glances at me, the edges of her mouth curving upward in a conspiratorial smile. "Better than I have in a while."

The nurse, in her distracted state, only nods once and makes a humming sound, which might be of assent. The woman checks the drip of the fluid into the intravenous line, presses a button on the machine it flows through before reaching Lois, and leaves without another word, utterly oblivious, it appears, to the added meaning to Lois' words. The nurse leaves the door open, and I instinctively rise, cross the room, and shut it again.

"So, how badly is Perry freaking out?" Lois asks, and I'm momentarily thrown off balance by the abrupt change in topic.

"He's pretty freaked out," I admit. "I'll call him soon to let him know you're awake. It wouldn't surprise me if he gives you some sort of Elvis-related lecture once you're well again."

"I'm surprised *you* didn't lecture me," she says, raising her eyebrows at me, daring me to respond to that.

"Lois," I say, shaking my head slowly, "you don't need a lecture from me. Besides, I promised I wouldn't. Am I thrilled that you made such a risky decision? No, I'm not. But the very fact that you wanted to come to me last night... that I actually appreciate. I've always loved how nothing ever gets in your way, once you make a decision. Actually," I say, rubbing the back of my neck somewhat shyly, "there isn't a single thing I can think of that I don't love about you."

"Even my babbling tangents?" she asks, toying with me.

"I especially love those," I answer truthfully. "Even if I don't always follow them right off the bat."

Again, she laughs, bringing a smile to my face. It's a wonder, how much light and happiness, love and laughter, are in my life now, when a scant twelve hours ago, my world was dark and dead, hopeless and worthless.

"Lois," I say, as a sudden thought crosses my mind. "I, uh, I didn't know how to contact your parents about everything that's been happening. I don't mind calling them... or delivering the information to them in person, via Superman Express."

Lois waves off my concerns. "I called them just before you arrived. Mom freaked and passed out while on the phone with me. Her doctor said she's in shock and it could be a day or two before she's well enough to travel. Dad can't get a flight out of Germany until his medical convention is over at the end of the week. He's got some important presentations to make in the upcoming days."

"Aww," I say, feeling horrible for her. "That's lousy."

But she shrugs it off. "I'm used to it."

"You shouldn't have to be," I argue back. "Tell me where to go, and I'll bring them here myself."

"No. Mom needs to get well. And, honestly, I'm not up to having her here just yet. You've met her. She's pretty... intense.

As for my father," she pauses and gestures vaguely, groping for words. "We've only just started to mend our relationship, ever since that boxing scandal. But I'm not quite ready to fully turn to him. Not yet. I want to, but..."

"But you're not sure how to begin," I finish for her.

"Yeah. I wouldn't mind if Lucy was here, but I can't even *begin* to imagine where she might be right now. And, in all honesty, I'd rather have you here, by my side, instead of out conducting a country-wide needle-in-a-haystack search."

"All right," I say, giving in to her reasoning. "But if you change your mind..."

"I'll let you know."

She smiles and takes a sip of her coffee. A grimace crosses her perfect face. Concern blossoms in my heart. She puts the cup down and looks at it like it has just profoundly offended her.

"What?"

"Nothing," she says. "I just hadn't realized how cold it's gotten."

"Oh, is that all? I can fix that," I say, raising my eyebrows playfully.

With that, I glance carefully back at the door, stretching out my hearing, cautiously, so as not to be bombarded with the full weight of the jumble of noise within the building. For the span of two heartbeats, I listen, only to find that we're not in any danger of being interrupted. Then I turn back to both our cups of coffee and slide my glasses down my nose, just enough to peek over the lenses. All it takes is a couple of darts of heat vision into each cup before curls of steam lazily rise from them once more. I replace my glasses and smile at Lois. Warming her drink is an action I've done dozens of times before, always as inconspicuously as possible. And, as always, it makes me feel so good to be able to do something for the woman I love.

"See? Easy," I say, snapping my fingers.

"You've always been my hero," Lois says, gazing lovingly at me and taking a sip. "No matter which suit you were wearing, or what you were doing; be it rescuing me from a bomb or offering to pay for lunch."

"No," I say quietly, picking up my own coffee and staring into its light brown depths. "I'm not. I'm not a hero. I've never wanted to be one, despite what it might look like to some people, what with me flashing around town in a less-than-subtle uniform." I pull my eyes from their examination of my drink to meet her steady gaze. "I'm just a man. Just a simple man, with simple farm-life roots, a regular job, and an incredible woman who not only loves me, but who has helped shape me into the person I am."

"Just a man," Lois says, smiling at me.

"Just a man," I repeat. "That's all I've ever wanted to be. *Your* man, if I'm allowed to get technical."

"You're allowed," she says, patting my hand. "And you *are*, Clark. You are."

Standing, I lean over Lois as she lays there in bed. My eyes close and instinct guides my lips to hers. For the first time in a few days now, I feel completely at liberty to kiss her. And so I do, my lips claiming hers, as gently as I can force myself to, afraid to hurt her in her weakened state. But what should have been a chaste kiss deepens before I'm aware of what's happening, and gentleness gives way to urgency and passion. Lois matches me, emotion for emotion, movement for movement, heartbeat for heartbeat.

Home.

In this moment, I'm finally home.

I know now that home isn't a place. It's not four walls, a floor, a roof over my head. It's not filled with mementos from my travels, a bed to sleep in when I need to rest, or a kitchen to fix a snack in. It's not a place to retreat to when I want to be alone and shut out the rest of the world.

It's an intangible, nearly indescribable feeling of completeness, of belonging. Home is not a place. Home is Lois. Home is the love we share. Home is the support we have always given each other, the little touches we've traded, the jokes and confessions we've spoken. It's the silent vow we're exchanging now, to always protect the other's heart, to forever regard the other as the center of our universe. It's knowing that I finally fit in, after so long. It's losing the feeling that's always followed me, wherever I've gone, that lingering thought that I am an outsider, an alien, a freak, inhuman. Home is knowing that my DNA doesn't matter, doesn't define me, that I *am* human, capable and perhaps even worthy of unconditional love. Home is having a family, not just in the people who raised me, but in this one perfect woman.

Breaking away from Lois, my head rests against her own. "Thank you," I whisper. "Thank you for being you. For everything you've given me. Being with you, for the first time in my life, I feel like I'm home, Lois. *You* are my home."

"And you are mine," she says, her voice almost husky, from the intensity of our kiss or from her inner emotions, I'm not sure. "You've helped to heal the wounds I once bore, helped mend my perception of home and family."

I kiss her forehead again, delighting in everything this wondrous, beautiful woman is to me. She sighs blissfully, but I catch a hint of a yawn hidden deeply within the sound.

"You should rest now," I say, pulling away. "You're still hurt pretty badly. And I can only speak for myself, but I'm eager for you to get well enough to get out of here."

Her smile is blinding. "You and me both. But promise me one thing? Actually...promise me two things."

"I promise."

"You don't know what they are yet," she says, laughing.

"Lois, if you asked me to fly into space and bring you the moon, I would do it," I say honestly.

"I know you would. Just...don't leave me, okay? Stay here?"

"Nothing could tear me from your side. Except, well, I probably should check in with Jimmy and Perry, and let them know you're doing better. My folks are worried too."

"Okay, you can leave for that," she says, granting me permission to go down to the lobby and use the pay phones. Of course, I won't do that until she's asleep. I don't want to miss one precious second of her wakefulness.

"And the other thing I've just sworn to?" I ask playfully, arching one eyebrow at her.

"When I get out of here..." She pauses a moment, uncertainly chewing at her lower lip.

"Yes?" I prod.

"Take me home...with you? I don't want to go to my place. I think I'll heal better having you close at hand."

"Of course I'll be there, Lois. But wouldn't you be more comfortable at your place? I mean, you'll have all of your things there."

"And my parents," she sighs. "At least, if we're at your place, I won't feel guilty about throwing them out when they get to be too much for me. Besides, I've never been as comfortable anywhere as I always have been at your place."

"Your wish is my command."

"Thanks." She stifles another yawn and closes her eyes, hugging the stuffed bear I brought her as if it was a lifeline. I shake my head silently, jealous of that bear. I want nothing more than to draw Lois into my embrace, and feel her arms tighten about me. Well, all in good time.

I settle as deeply into the thin cushioning of the bedside chair as I can, thankful for my impervious skin, which doesn't feel the discomfort of the seat. In the sudden silence of the room, I feel ridiculously bereft. I miss the sound of her voice, filling the small room and making me forget, for a while, the situation; that Lois is

hurt because I wasn't there to protect her. Now, as she drifts off to sleep, I am once more painfully aware of where I'm sitting — in a hospital room, the regular intervals of beeps from the various machines hooked to Lois the only thing breaking the oppressive silence. I hate that, so I tune in to listen to her steady breathing and the Siren call of her heartbeat, until at least another hour has passed, and it is well past the time I should have informed Jimmy, Perry, and my folks of Lois' improved condition.

Placing a kiss on her head, careful not to wake her, I leave, silently swearing to return as soon as I can. She murmurs in her sleep, making what appears to be a contented sound, making me smile. I stand, rooted in place, looking at Lois in what I can only describe as absolute wonderment and awe.

In the span of less than twelve hours, my whole life has changed.

Last night, I was not much more than a broken, empty shell of a man. I had no future, no hope, no reason left to carry on. My heart felt like it was simultaneously deflated, yet in danger of exploding from all the hurt and utter despair I was shouldering. I wasn't sure who I was last night. I felt as if I was neither Clark nor Superman, just some lonely, faceless, unidentified being, drifting through life. I felt neither alive nor dead, just merely existing. But today! Today, I am complete. A bright, shining, wonderful, enticing future lays stretched before me, like the Yellow Brick Road, leading off to Oz and the fulfillment of every wish and secret dream I've ever had in my life. My heart is so full of hope and love that I feel like it must surely burst from trying to contain it all. In Lois' eyes, I'm not Superman, at least, not primarily. I am Clark. She understands that, better than I ever imagined she would. She knows that Clark is the man, the *real* man, and Superman is just the outward manifestation of his abilities, an undercover identity with which I can make an impact on the world. Her acceptance — her *love* — has poured new life into this once empty vessel of flesh and bone; a life so unbelievably fresh and promising it seems almost unreal somehow.

"Thank you, Lois," I say to her sleeping form, wishing her sweet dreams and healing rest. "I love you."

Days after Lois first awoke in the hospital, she's healed enough to be released, though under strict orders not to exert herself in any way, shape, or form. As promised, I bring her back to my apartment, which I've spent the previous couple of nights preparing for her, all the while wondering if I'm going to have to restrain her so that she actually adheres to the doctor's orders to stay in bed as much as possible. Half the drawers in my dresser now house her clothing. A new television and VCR are set up in the bedroom, her Ivory Tower tapes stacked neatly on the nightstand, in case she should want them. Her computer too, lays in wait for her, should she decide she wants to work on her novel. In the bathroom, her toiletries stand in a line on the counter around the sink, and her toothbrush hangs next to mine in the holder.

It's easy to imagine spending the rest of my life this way, her things next to mine, sharing a living space, knowing she's right there with me for always, knowing I'll never spend another night wallowing in loneliness and sadness.

Rescued.

I feel rescued by her presence, her love. I feel saved in a million different ways, each time she smiles at me or cracks a joke with me. I feel sheltered from every sorrow the world can try and hurl at me, trying to break me down, every single time she touches me, be it a kiss, a hug, a pat on the hand.

Leaving Lois behind each time I need to go out is pure torture, regardless of the reason why. Even going around the block to pick up a fresh gallon of milk is hard, knowing I have to be apart from her for a few minutes, wondering if she'll need me

while I am gone. Perry lets me do as much work as I can from home, and I'm more than happy to fill Lois in on the stories I'm working on — all mercifully and relatively uncomplicated — as I write. It seems to make her happy, to keep her mind so occupied, and I'm soon in the habit of sitting next to her in the bedroom — in a chair pulled up alongside the bed or actually on the bed itself — while I write up my articles and email them off to Perry.

Without her knowing it, at least at first, I add her name to my byline, sharing the credit with her. It's only fair. She's corrected my choice in words and sentence structure a number of times, unable to relinquish any control of her reporter's instincts. I'm glad of that. I've needed her help, being far too distracted in caring for her needs and the warm, blissful haze fogging my mind as a man wholly and unreservedly in love. Her help has kept me focused.

The first time she picked up the day's edition of the paper and saw her name next to mine on the byline, she lectured me, but that hasn't stopped me from doing it. It hasn't stopped the twinkle of appreciation from alighting in her eyes when she sees it either, so I feel justified in my insistence in sharing the credit.

Now, though, I'm sitting in my living room, watching a game on the TV, the volume as low as it can possibly go. Not that it matters. With my enhanced hearing, I barely have to work at hearing the commentators. My cheers are silent fists punched upward into the empty air. Even my winces at bad plays or calls barely make a sound. I'm all too aware of Lois sleeping in my bed, just on the other side of the wall. My team is getting slaughtered, so, after a while of watching the score broaden into an impossibly wide chasm, I flip the television off. I'm already laying down, floating just above my couch, so I merely lower myself down, grab a throw blanket, and settle in for the night.

I'm awakened in the middle of the night by something I can't place my finger on at first. It wasn't a cry for help. I would have known, immediately upon waking, what disrupted my sleep. Groggily, I wipe at my eyes, trying to rid the sleep from them, hoping it will help me mentally focus. A yawn rips through me, though I stifle it as best I can, mindful of how late it is and the fact that Lois is sound asleep not far away.

Or is she?

A whimper comes from my bedroom. Lois! Oh no! Is she hurt? In pain? Is her wound bothering her? With a flash, I'm fully dragged back into complete wakefulness and am at Lois' side.

She's tossing and turning in the bed, still whimpering. Her eyes are closed and her breathing is ragged. By all appearances, she's still wrapped in her dreams. Unpleasant ones, it seems. Again, a pained, frightened sound escapes her. There's a mumbled word mixed in with it. Did she just call my name? Then she almost screams, waking herself up in the process, before I can gently shake her from her nightmare.

"Lois," I call softly, switching the beside light on, and blinking at the sudden influx of light. "Lois, it's okay. It was just a dream."

"Clark?" she calls, blinking against the light and getting her bearings.

"I'm right here," I assure her.

"I was there," she says, staring out into space, not looking at me at all, but rather *through* me in an unsettling way.

"Where?" I ask, kneeling by the bed.

"On the sidewalk," she says, and I struggle to follow her train of thought. "I could see them coming for me."

"Oh," I say, as her words finally coalesce into a bigger picture, one that makes sense to me.

"I tried to fight them off," she says, still not seeming to see me, still speaking mostly to herself.

"Lois," I say, cupping her chin with my hand and forcing her to look at me. "It was just a dream. The guys who hurt you are in jail now. And thanks to the statement you gave Detective Wolfe,

that's where they will be for a long, long time."

"I was so scared," she admits.

I brush the unshed tears from her eyes, where they lay pooled and glistening. "I'm here, and I'll regret not being there that night until my dying day. But you're safe now. I'll protect you, from every evil in this world, with every ounce of strength I possess. I promise."

"Thanks," she says, her voice a shadow of a whisper.

"Anytime," I say, shrugging lightly and giving her a smile. "You want to go back to sleep?"

"Maybe," she replies warily. "I'm not sure. I'm tired, but I don't want to slip back into that nightmare."

"I could make you a cup of tea," I offer. "One of the soothing blends I have."

Lois shakes her head, her dark tresses bouncing in the lamplight. "No thanks. What would be soothing to me is you."

"Me?" I keep my tone playful and arch my eyebrows.

That makes her giggle. "Yes, lunkhead. You."

"Lunkhead?"

Lois rolls her eyes in the most adorable, exasperated way. "Just shut up and get into bed, would you? I could use a strong pair of arms around me."

Who am I to argue?

I stand, pull the covers back, and slip into bed beside her. Carefully, I draw her to me, moving with as much calculated precision as I can. I don't want to accidentally cause her any pain as she continues to heal from her gunshot wound. So I gather her in my arms, easing her against my chest, as cautiously as I would touch a rare, valuable, fragile treasure. Because, to me, she is. She is the rarest, most precious jewel in all the world. And though she isn't going to break if I breathe too deeply around her, her comfort is of paramount importance to me.

"Stay the night?" Lois asks as she leans into me, letting out a contented sigh.

"I couldn't imagine a better way to spend the rest of this night," I say honestly. I place a kiss on the top of her head and take a second to inhale the scent of her berry-scented conditioner.

"Thank you," she says after a few moments of silence, during which, I'd begun to wonder if she'd fallen back to sleep.

"For what?" I'm more than a little confused. Is she thanking me for getting into bed with her?

"For this," she says, nuzzling the back of her head into my chest. "For always being there for me, no matter how silly the reason has been, like you are now, protecting me from my nightmares. For allowing me to invade your apartment while I recuperate. For not giving up on me, no matter what, despite how horrible I treated you when we were first partnered up, regardless of how blind I was to even *consider* dating Dan."

"Lois, we've been over this," I remind her, pausing to kiss her head again. "There isn't a single force on this Earth that could stop me from loving you, or make me give up on you. You mean the world to me. But, I *have* been meaning to talk to you about your staying here."

"I know, I've overstayed my welcome, right?"

I shake my head and chuckle. "Not even close. I was thinking... what if you, once you're fully recovered... *didn't* leave? What if you just stayed here, with me... forever?"

"Are you asking me to move in with you?"

I nod, though she can't see it, her back against my chest and all. "I am. Lois, I wasn't kidding when I said I want to spend the rest of my life at your side. I love you. In fact, I love you so much that it physically hurts me to be apart from you, as acutely and as real as Kryptonite exposure. Having you here, living with me these past couple of days, it's only made me realize even more clearly how much I never want to be apart from you. I've loved seeing your toothbrush next to mine. I've enjoyed cooking for two at every meal. I've been thrilled beyond words to wake up

every morning to the sound of your voice and laughter.”

I ease her away from my body and get up from the bed. I can't believe how galvanized I suddenly feel, when not ten minutes ago, I felt sluggish and weighted down by my need for sleep. I didn't plan for things to happen the way they are right now, but I find myself unable to hold my tongue. I wanted to do this in a much more intimate setting, somewhere considerably more impressive than my bedroom, and certainly when Lois is fully recovered. But now, I'm completely incapable of stopping myself.

“Clark?”

“Just a second, Lois. I promise.”

I step into the kitchen and open my junk drawer. It's been a perfect hiding place, ever since I placed the item there, after buying it while on my way home from seeing Lois in the hospital on the day she woke up. Lois' lack of cooking prowess means she wouldn't have explored the drawers even if she *was* allowed to spend more time on her feet. As it is, I've kept a careful watch on her, and her only out-of-bed activities have been to shower and to sit at the table for meals. Now though, I rummage around in the back of the drawer, finding what I'm seeking by touch alone, throwing a glance behind me to make sure Lois isn't trying to investigate what I'm up to. She's not, but only because I've been moving quickly, though not at super speed. In a moment, I'm back in my bedroom, my hands behind my back.

“Clark? What are you doing?”

“What I've wanted to do since the second I met you, when you stormed into Perry's office during my interview, and straight into my heart.” I'm sinking, sinking down to the floor, sinking down to one knee, and pulling the small black box from behind my back, flicking it open to reveal the ring I've pinned my hopes and dreams to. “Lois, I fell in love with you that very moment, when I saw you for the first time. I've been in love with you every moment since, and will be, for the rest of my life. This isn't how I planned things, in my head. I always thought, that when it came time for this, it would be in some romantic setting. But, God, Lois, I almost lost you. I almost lost *everything*. And I've tried to hold off, until you were completely well again. I just... I can't anymore. Having you here, living with me, it's only hammered home to me how much I need to say this to you, *now*, not in another day or week, or even in an hour. Lois, you are my heart. And just as I can't live without my heart, I can't live without you. Will you marry me?”

For a second, she's speechless and I wonder if I should have continued to wait to propose. She swallows hard, now nodding, but still not saying a word. Another harsh swallow, and it seems she's finally loosened her vocal cords.

“Yes.”

My breath leaves me in a rush and for a second, I'm too shaky to stand, my strength fleeing in the wake of that one, single, wonderful word, that solemn promise. Adrenaline finally kicks in, allowing me to move again, and I'm standing before I'm aware that I'm even able to move, let alone doing it. The ring is in my hand, slipping over Lois' finger. When did I remove it from the box? The delicate band easily slides over her finger, coming to rest, at long last. I allow myself a fleeting instant of pride that I choose the right size ring. Then all thought flees as I lean in and kiss her deeply, so deeply I'm in danger of getting lost in the profound depths of our shared love.

When we part, I'm inexplicably back in the bed with her. I guess I wound up floating us both into this position. Once more, I gather her to me, though, instead of sitting up, I lay us both down. Her head rests atop my chest, using me as a pillow. Her hand comes up, admiring the diamond adorning her finger and the way the stone glistens in the light of the lamp.

“It's beautiful,” she says, and I can see the smile on her face.

“*You're* beautiful,” I correct her.

“I love it, Clark. It's perfect. Just like you.”

“Without you, Lois, it's just a ring. Just a band of shaped metal and a rock. Without you, I'm just an alien visitor living on this planet.”

“Don't ever talk about the man I love like that again,” she mock warns me.

That makes me chuckle. We both go silent for a couple of minutes, listening to all the night noises. Beyond the windows of my bedroom — *our* bedroom — I hear the screech of tires as someone races down the street. A dog barks and a cat hisses in return. A couple of very drunk people sing, badly off-key, as they stagger down the sidewalk, hopefully heading for their homes. The couple in the apartment building next to mine, the Ritters, argue so loudly through their open windows that I don't need my super hearing to know that.

“Clark?” Lois asks after a little while. “You still awake?”

“Yes.”

“I was thinking...”

“About?”

“Well, you said before that you didn't plan to ask me this way. I'm curious as to what you *had* planned on, because, truth be told, I couldn't imagine a more perfect or romantic proposal.”

For a moment, I'm not sure if she's teasing me or not, or just trying to make me feel better about the mundane setting of our engagement. But I don't detect any pity or sense that she's merely humoring me.

“Well,” I say slowly, “I hadn't really planned out anything definite. But I always imagined that if you knew about me, before I proposed, then I'd fly you off to someplace amazing. Paris, maybe. Or Tahiti. Or...who knows where. I hadn't decided. Wherever we were though, we would have spent the whole day together, then I would have taken you someplace scenic, dropped to one knee, and asked you to marry me. Then we would have spent the entire night celebrating, just the two of us in our own little world.”

“I'm glad you didn't,” she says, surprising me.

“What?”

“If you had done that, I think it would have felt too much like I was getting engaged to a superhero.”

“Well, you kind of *are*.”

She shakes her head, twisting slightly to look me in the eyes. “No, I'm not. Oh sure, my fiancé might occasionally don tights and a cape to save the world. But I'm not engaged to Superman. My fiancé is just a man; the son of farmers, a damn good reporter, and the best friend I've ever been lucky enough to know. The only thing super about the man I'm marrying is his heart.”

With that, she's kissing me, her soft lips pressed against my own with urgency and passion, letting me know, in her own way, just how deeply her love for me runs. Thought is obliterated as her love courses through my veins, mixing with my own to form the most powerful force on Earth. Again, I feel the wonderful, mind-blowing sensation of coming home, of belonging, of finally being complete.

For this simple man, it is all I could ever dare to dream for.

THE END